1: Grigson G-5 (1927-1934) 1949
AW32 Gond AW32
Hill Maria
Bison Horn Maria



for a tooth; but nowadays this is generally satisfied by invoking the police and the courts. But distances are great in Bastar, and in the rains, when the early hill grains are ripe, communications are bad; often the villagers conspire to hush up a murder or leave it to those affected to take their own direct action, rather than disorganize agricultural work by the troubles of a long police enquiry followed by committal proceedings and a sessions trial.

It is a relief to return from this darker side of the Bison-horn Maria's character to the light-heartedness of all Marias, but especially the Hill Maria. An engaging feature of this is his readiness to burlesque himself. A village *gaita* (headman) at Tondawada set the whole camp in fits of laughter by his description of his first vain attempts to use a pair of bullocks in the plough, mimicking himself pulled hither and thither by these wild-cat animals; at Hikul I was treated to a similar comic representation of what would happen if a Maria attempted to milk a cow. They are quick to seize on any foibles or peculiarities of individuals, without respect of persons, and have a happy knack of inventing apposite nicknames; this trait is common throughout the State, where there are nicknames for almost every State official current among all the primitive tribes, while few of the leading Hindu and Mohammedan settlers are referred to by their true names.

Frankness and honesty are still as characteristic as ever of the hill men and the wilder Bison-horn Marias, and many a man arraigned for homicide will state in court perfectly frankly why it was essential to kill his victim and how it was done. I have very seldom found any hesitate to answer any questions, even about the most intimate domestic matters. The Bison-horn Maria, however, being, at least in the open tracts, more sophisticated, is inclined to be suspicious; and he certainly is learning the ways of the courts, and how to defeat a justice administered on the evidence and not according to the facts; many know, for example, that the death penalty may be escaped if you can convince your judge that you murdered your victim because you believed him to be bewitching you. But in general a Maria witness can still be relied upon to speak the truth, although it involve his dearest relatives or himself in trouble; and the occasional pleader from British India is soon hopelessly at sea if he tries his usual methods of cross-examination even on a Bison-horn Maria who knows Halbi. Fortunately, the restoration of the criminal and civil jurisdiction of the village and *pargana* panchayats will considerably reduce Maria experience of the law courts. The Hill Maria never has had much recourse to them, petty theft being almost unknown and murder rare. His attitude may to some extent be gauged by the following example.

2: Elwin E-5 (1935-1942) 1947 AW32 Gond AW32
Muria

*CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE*

# MORAL STANDARDS IN THE GHOTUL

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THERE is little immorality in the ghotul. The outsider who looks on it as a place of unbridled licence and youthful corruption commits two errors, one of method and one of fact. His method of approach is wrong, for we cannot import our own ideas and standards into another culture and judge that culture by ours. But he is even wrong in point of fact. The ghotul is regulated by exact and far-reaching laws which are very generally obeyed. Its life, compared with the life of young people in other aboriginal villages, is marked by restraint rather than by excess.

Let us first consider the general standards of good and evil among the Muria. I have often discussed this question in the ghotul. 'The greatest sin', said a Muria in Markabera, 'is to injure someone by magic. It is very bad to hurt a man, specially an old man, with an axe. To kill cattle without cause is bad, but there is nothing wrong in sacrificing a bull or cow for a funeral or at a festival.' On the other hand, 'to give food to the hungry is a great virtue. If a man can't pay his rent, and there is a warrant for him, to save him is a great virtue. If a stranger comes from far away, and I entertain him in my house, that is a great virtue. If a man loses his way, to put him on the road again is a great virtue. If a man is rich and when we ask a loan he gives more than we ask and takes little interest, he is a good man. If a man is a Siraha and we ask his help, if he comes at once to help the sick, he is a good man. If a man is old and wise, and when we are in trouble he does not talk foolishly or reproach us, but gives sound advice, he is a good man.'

A quarrelsome and angry man is regarded as very bad. A gentle and kindly manner, freedom from bitterness and jealousy, generosity and open-handedness are qualities that are much admired. The late headman of Masora was regarded by many of his people as a sort of saint. 'He speaks kindly whether he is hot (drunk) or cold (sober). He speaks slowly to everyone. He has no enemies among his own folk, though he has many enemies among the *paik* (subordinate officials), for he always protects the poor from *begar* (forced labour). His greatest enemy is the Kotwar who would take work even from a corpse. But the headman never gets angry, never orders you about; when he wants you to do something, he talks as if he were requesting you to do it. He has often paid rent and fines for the poorest villagers from his own money. All the children run after him. He laughs and jokes with everyone and is nice even to the Ganda.' Anyone who has listened to an outsider, whether chaprasi or landlord or contractor, talking to Muria will appreciate the virtue of the saying, 'He speaks slowly to everyone'.

Another good man in Masora was Lakadu, a young man, very lovable. 'He never quarrels, but earns his living and remains quietly at home. We have never heard of a quarrel in his house. He is cool.' In Binjhli I was told that the most respected man in those parts was Dibdu of Karlakha. He is admired for his wisdom. 'He knows all languages, all knowledge, all wisdom and how to share it. He understands what to do at a marriage, at a funeral, at a festival for the gods. He cannot quarrel. If he gets drunk he goes and lies down somewhere by himself, for fear he may speak roughly to someone. He has never stolen anything, or beaten anyone. He lives happily with his family.' Another man of the same type is Dandi Muria of Palki.

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## MORAL STANDARDS IN THE GHOTUL

In Kuntpadar, the people stressed the virtue of a democratic outlook, the estimating of everyone as equal to yourself. In Metawand, they thought more of generosity. To help a man in need and be kind to those who come to you in trouble is the sign of a good man. Courage is also admired, but not specially so. Yet it is said of Kurwal Kumoti of Palki that 'where the English only venture into the jungle armed with guns and protected by many people, he goes anywhere without a weapon and has no fear of bears or tigers'.

Is sexual morality in our Western sense an ingredient of the good man's character? When I have raised this point in conversation, the reply has always referred to forbidden relations. 'The greatest sin'—this is the view of Lakmu of Masora—'is to have something to do with your younger brother's wife. Or for a girl to have intercourse with a Ganda.' Elsewhere, in several villages, I was told how serious it was to break the laws of exogamy, to have intercourse with a forbidden relation and to commit adultery. In Masora, when I asked if they thought it wrong for the unmarried to have intercourse with each other, for a long time they could not understand the question. When they did, they answered, 'Only if he sleeps with the same girl too often: he must change'.

Here then we have a general picture of the moral qualities that are considered desirable and the vices that are deplored. Let us now come nearer to the ghotul. 'In the ghotul no sin can be committed.' This is not strictly true, but it is sufficiently true to explain the wonderful innocence and simplicity of the chelik and motiari. There is no sin in sex, provided—as I have said before—sexual relations are enjoyed with the right people, at the right time, in the right place and in the right way.

Chelik and motiari must choose the right partner. They must strictly avoid the inner circle of forbidden relatives. Intercourse within the clan is forbidden, but is not regarded as very serious so long as no one knows about it and it does not result in pregnancy. In the *jodidār* ghotul, chelik and motiari must be faithful to one another; in the other, they must avoid too great attachments to special individuals. It is practically unknown for a motiari to have an affair with someone outside the tribe. One of the first lessons taught to a young girl in the ghotul is that she must avoid Chasia, Ganda, Mahara and Lohar. It is probably safe to say that no European has ever had anything to do with a Muria girl, and I am told by State officials that in the old days when, in the more 'advanced' areas round Jagdalpur, it was the custom for the village headman to bring women for touring subordinates, this was never done in the ghotul villages of the north. I am told that chaprasis, forest guards and constables, who are sometimes such a menace to rural virtue, are never able to seduce the motiari of the ghotul, where the village dormitory remains to protect tribal honour. This opinion is confirmed by the fact that venereal disease is almost unknown among the Muria. In fact, the Chief Medical Officer of the State, Dr W. P. S. Mitchell, has told me that in thirty years' service he had never seen a straight case of venereal disease among the Bastar aboriginals.

The rules governing the sexual life of the ghotul are strict and appear to be generally observed. Breaches of the rules are sufficiently rare to be talked of for many years and to be severely punished.

But sexual intercourse must not only be with the right people: it must be at the right time. It is tabooed before the greater festivals, before a hunting expedition, during the Pus Kolang dance and, most important of all, during a girl's menstrual period.

2: Elwin E-5 (1935-1942) 1947 AW32 Gond AW32
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boys and girls. They dance clasped in each other's arms; they go about together, chelik with his arm round the neck of motiari. How revealing are Plates LXXV and XCI. In one a chelik lies on a cot with his arm on his motiari's shoulder, while she sits almost on top of him making leaves. They were not posed for the photo, and they showed no embarrassment at my approach with the mysterious camera, even though they were from a village I did not know well. In the other Plate two chelik and a motiari are listening to the gramophone outside my tent. They are completely absorbed in it and in each other. One of the boys embraces the girl with both his arms. You would not see this natural innocence in the more 'advanced' parts of aboriginal India.

But this refreshing freedom never degenerates into immodesty in public. It would be unthinkable for a chelik to dance naked—as I have seen older men do—in the presence of women or of his elders. The motiari never indulge in the cheerful vulgarity of the old women at a wedding. A chelik never catches hold of a girl immodestly in general company, though he will embrace her and walk with his arms about her. The great festival dances, though the air is full of romantic suggestion and the older men dance with the greatest licence, are conducted by chelik and motiari with complete decorum.

The sympathetic reader will realize how hopeless it is to bring our cut-and-dried judgements of sexual morality to bear upon a situation such as this. But he will also realize that even on his own standards the ghotul cannot be called immoral in the sense that it has no rules or laws or that it ignores those it has. Its regulations are as far-reaching and as strict as our own, and they are often better kept. For the rules are not imposed from without, but have been made by the ghotul-members themselves. Thus they are reasonable, adapted to the actual situation, and so easy to obey.

It is curious that while a Western visitor to a Muria village, if he is of a Puritan turn, will probably be chiefly concerned about the pre-nuptial relations of the children, the Hindu visitor—who is, of course, by far the more frequent—will be scandalized by the casual attitude of the Muria towards cows. Many years ago earnest efforts were made by Hindu reformers in the State to stop cow-sacrifice, and still today—though the majority of State officials preserve an admirable restraint in interfering with tribal customs—landlords, merchants, schoolmasters and travellers do what they can to put an end to the practice. But, except for a few centres where Hindu influence is strong, bulls and cows continue to be sacrificed and eaten all over the northern part of the State. The Muria cannot believe that this is wrong, for the gods demand it. There is nothing in their culture or mythology to forbid it—and indeed we here have a good example of the difficulty of importing a new idea into a system that has no provision for it. Yet if the Muria ever does ponder about 'moral' problems it is this that perplexes him and not any question about pre-nuptial chastity.

Stealing is generally condemned, but it is licensed on some special occasions. The chelik are expected to steal a cock when they take the newly-wedded bride and bridegroom to bed; they appear to have similar licence when they perform ceremonial dances round the village.

The incidence of crime is very low. An experienced police officer, who had served in the ghotul area for twelve years, told me that in all this time there had been no case of murder, riot, assault, hurt, or rape in connexion with the ghotul. There has not been a single case of rape against a Muria, though non-aboriginals have been arrested for raping Muria women. It is a remarkable thing that most of the crime in the Kondagaon and Narayanpur Tahsils occurs

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## THE MURIA AND THEIR GHOTUL

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in the Mardapal Pargana and along the north-eastern border in just those areas where the dormitory system is moribund. The ghotul has almost disappeared from the Mardapal Pargana, and the system is rapidly decaying along the border. A policeman told me that in his opinion ghotul-education was a most valuable preventative of crime, for boys and girls learnt to share everything and to scorn acquisitiveness and the lust of possession.

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To lie and cheat is reprehensible, but does not seem to be taken very seriously. It all depends on whom you are deceiving. It may well be a positive virtue to give an inquisitive ethnographer a false date for a ceremony or direct him to the wrong village when he wants to see a funeral. To break an oath or take a false oath is not so much an offence against morality as to do something very dangerous. In Binjhli I was told of a former Pargana Manjhi who stole a lot of rice during a famine. He was put on his trial, but took a powerful oath that he was innocent. As he walked out of the court, 'his eyes broke' and he became blind.

Muria ethics, therefore, combine a firm belief in taboos and the danger of breaking them, with a faith in the value of certain amiable and social virtues. The Muria are a closely knit tribe; as their culture is still living they are bound together by many ties. They therefore regard as most reprehensible those faults and crimes that would break the solidarity of the tribe—anger, jealousy, assault, adultery that leads to these things, the practice of magic that divides a community with hatred and suspicion, the breach of tribal laws of relationship which destroy its unity, and the breach of the laws of endogamy which destroy its integrity. Those virtues are most admired which bring men together in peace and happiness—a gentle tongue, an open hand and house, the love of wife and children, loyalty to tribal law.

In conclusion, let us for a moment look at the ghotul from our own Western standpoint, and try to assess the value of the Muria attitude to life and especially to sex not by their standards but by ours. It is not the business of the ethnographer to pass moral judgements, but he may perhaps imagine himself talking to a Christian missionary or a devout Hindu reformer, both of whom take so different a view to the Muria's, regarding sex as bad and dangerous in itself and any form of 'unchastity' as the worst of sins. Is there anything to be said for the Muria way of life?

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In the first place it must be said that the chelik and motiari are wonderfully happy. Their life is full, interesting, exciting, useful. The ghotul is, as they often say, 'a little school'. The chelik are 'like Boy Scouts', as I was told in a village which had a troop in the local school. There is no comparison between these children and the sad-eyed, dirty ragamuffins of villages at a similar cultural level elsewhere. In the ghotul the children are taught lessons of cleanliness, discipline and hard work that remain with them throughout their lives. They are taught to take a pride in their appearance, to respect themselves and their elders; above all, they are taught the spirit of service. These boys and girls work very hard indeed for the public good. They are immediately available for the service of State officials or for work on the roads. They must be ready to work at a wedding or a funeral. They must attend to the drudgery of festivals. In most aboriginal villages of the Central Provinces the children are slack, dirty, undisciplined, and with no sense of public spirit. Even those who attend school generally only develop a strong desire to advance their own interests at the expense of their fellows.

With all this our missionary and Hindu friends will be in agreement. 'But', they will say, 'that is not the point. Our complaint is that these youngsters



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